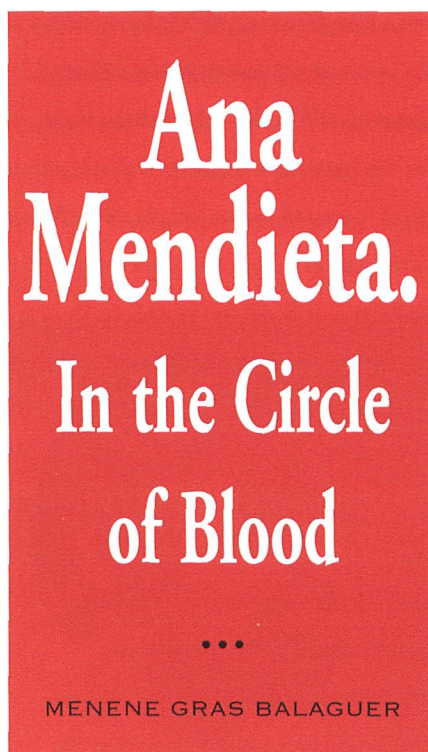


TERRITORIES

Earth is the substance which Ana Mendieta uses to create not only her human silhouettes which lie on the ground, but also nearly all her other work. In her work, earth is like an organic material, through which blood circulates, bringing it to life, where all things human are inscribed. Her work, despite its fragility and its inevitably ephemeral nature, manages to avoid *growing old and decadent*. Her recovery of this relationship of integration between man and nature is reproduced in every single piece of work, the majority of which are deliberately created with natural materials. In her work, this concept of transformation causes alterations in the very raw materials of which we are born: blood which takes on the color of earth and leaves, the “form” of forms, like the ‘being’ of humanness. The current exhibition of a selection of Ana Mendieta’s work is curated by Gloria Moure, and is an attempt to reconstruct the artist’s formal universe. Mendieta’s world is inhabited by the silhouettes of this tree-woman, this man-woman, earth-woman, leaf-woman, this woman-woman dressed in countless guises so as to gain access to the self-knowledge that had always been denied to her. The interest which Mendieta still arouses today stems from her capacity to subject herself, of her own free will, to experiments which push the body to its



limits. Her work is created in a very specific context, between the borders of fiction and reality in her own geography and on her own body, which she uses as the measure of all things. She leaves her mark on nature, using only the elements and materials given to her by nature. She constructs bodies or fragments of bodies, each labeled in their solitude, withdrawing as if unaware that they are being observed. Once exposed to the elements, they are caressed by the air until they are weather-beaten. Their immobility is a kind of permanence against the shadows of time. Time observes us from within the earth. She called it the origin of all things: the blood which controls movement in nature and

organic beings, like the synthesis of a divided whole. Because, when the time comes, it is also what separates us from life.

Almost everything has already been said about Ana Mendieta; more has been written about her than could ever have been expected, but not more than necessary. Any omission would surely be dishonest. Her short life calls for an extra effort to preserve our memory of her, so that the role she played can continue to have an influence today. Photographs and videos are the only documentary proof of the majority of her actions and performances, except of course, for the catalogued works, which have been preserved despite the difficulties arising from their condition and decisions about where they should be kept. Her history is the history of the earth, a history thousands of years old, which she would like to devour entirely, absorb into her self, regardless of the obstacle of her other selves, her tree-self, her stone-self, her leaf-self, her water-self, her earth-self which is self-determined. The temptation to regress to a pre-birth life is not a result of non-being, but rather of her eagerness to be. The tragic events which brought her life to an abrupt end did not resolve the conflict. On the contrary, they seem to have ignored the victim’s will and desires completely. It was unexpected.

according to those closest to her. And now it is pointless to ask why or what happened. Now, no one is interested in investigating her death or continuing to search for culprits. Her death was provoked, induced. But, now she is gone. She disappeared. She broke to pieces in the air with the force of gravity crushing her body against the roof of a delicatessen. Nobody knows if she was still alive when her body hit the cement, nor even whether she survived for a painful instant after being ripped apart. Nobody saw her. Only a passer-by who was unable to remember what he had seen or the scream of terror he thought he had heard. Confusion blurred the importance of the facts. Hypotheses are difficult to prove. No one has wanted to know more or delve any further. Too many years have passed. We will never know if she perhaps chose her destiny. The fall disfigured her completely. The body was unrecognizable. She was nobody. The only thing which could be identified was a dark shape which appeared to be a body, its organs squashed on the ground. It was the final injustice and the ultimate humiliation.

Mendieta's body is of the earth. Invisible blood flows within her. She is the life and the death of all natural beings. She forms and deforms her body in the earth, against glass as in "Glass on Body" (Iowa, 1972), making moulds, drawing her sex in clay, the sex of the earth which gives life to all beings, or

encrusting herself on rocky surfaces as in "El laberinto de Venus" (Canada, 1982) or earlier in "Maroya" (moon), created in Havana (1981), followed by the series of silhouettes made in Long Island in 1983. The limits of the body are the limits of the earth. Water is blood, pumped around the body of the earth, just as in our own. Her body is a landscape. It is the landscape. It reproduces a return to our place of origin: nature. It searches for itself, searches for the other, for all others. It invents the creative process; it undresses and smears itself with animal blood, or covers itself with the hair shaved off a friend's beard as in "Facial Hair Transplant" (Iowa, 1972), or dresses itself with the white feathers of a plucked chicken in front of a curious and incredulous public in "Feathers on a Woman" (Iowa, 1972). On stage, she is usually alone. However, her acts are public, just as Marina Abramovic's were. Her body is for sale. It belongs to no one, not even to herself. Only the earth can possess it. She knew that. She wanted it to be so. And so she prostituted herself, by means of a make-believe metamorphosis of her body into different forms and states, resorting to simulations of ritual practices, which sacrifice what we are, in order to gain access to another world. Her objective: liberation from every subjection hostile to her manifestations against limits. Right from the beginning, her work constantly involved the earth, the desire to recuperate the lost body, the body

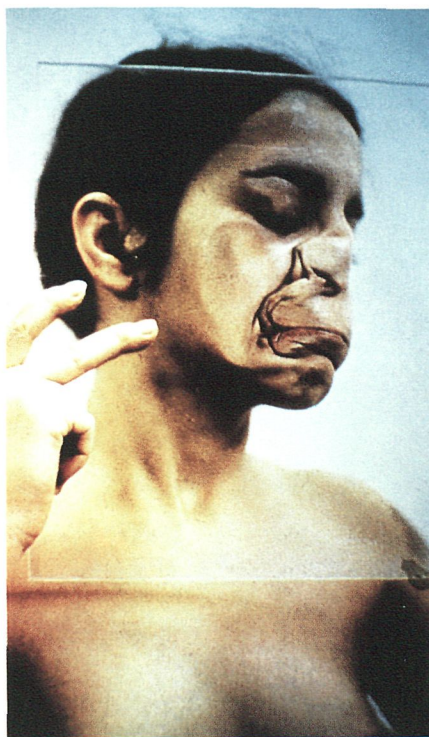
that turned into an alien copulating with us. Duchamp had preceded her, shaving the precise shape of the Jewish star on his head or dressing as a woman for Man Ray's photograph. Beuys can also be considered a predecessor of body art with the adoption of fat and felt as raw materials in his work, which he deployed as miraculous medicines which allowed him to survive the air crash he suffered during World War II. The body does not seek to portray itself or to be portrayed in the work of these artists, or in the work of Eva Hesse, Marina Abramovic, Rebecca Horn and Doris Salcedo, for whom the body is the principal medium. Bruce Naumann, Vito Acconci, Denis Oppenheim, Dan Graham, Gilbert and George, Arnulf Rainer and Rudolf Schwarzkogler have all, likewise, experimented with the body, in contrast to object art. In the exhibition's introductory text, Gloria Moure situates Ana Mendieta in the context of the explosion of "body art," and points out that, in spite of the historical parallels between her work and the rest of "body art," Mendieta had an intimate and emotional relationship with nature that enabled her "total realization." Nonetheless, the historical coincidences also contributed to distinguishing her work from that of others.

In the last Venice Biennial, the curator Jean Clair aimed to document the history of the body in twentieth century art, looking at the changes which have taken place both in figurative painting, portraits and self-

portraits, and in performances, happenings, actions and digital images. Judy Fox's "The Virgin Mary" (1993), Mona Hatoum's "Corps étranger" (1994), several distorted portraits by Cindy Sherman (1990), and Inez van Lamsweerde's photographs of manipulated bodies and faces, such as "Little Wendy" (1993) are the most relevant examples of this incorporation of the body as a subject of expression and active communication. The exhibition was perhaps over-ambitious, in that it tried to cover far too many examples that had less in common than was suggested, but it was certainly informative. Greer Lankton's prostheses, Stephen von Huene's "Tisch-Tanzer sculptures" (1988-1993), food shaped like human organs by Wols (A.O.W Schulze) and Francesco Clemente's series of "Meditaciones" were also present. The exhibition – called "Identity and Alterity (1895-1995)" – aimed to be a history of the body's representation throughout the century, but strangely, it did not include any of Ana Mendieta's work. This would have been an ideal opportunity to exhibit her work in a suitable environment, and it would surely have made it easier to understand. It is not clear whether this exclusion was deliberate, or whether it was due simply to the difficulty of obtaining her work. Either way, Mendieta's exclusion is unjustifiable, given the pretensions of such an exhibition.

Far from exhausting itself, the

contemporary debate about the use of the body in artistic practice and the investigation of its limits continues to thrive. This is one of the reasons why Ana Mendieta's work is currently arousing so much interest and attracting comparisons with other work similar to hers. In "Capitalisme énergumène," Jean



Ana Mendieta. *Glass on body*, 1972. Performance. University of Iowa, Iowa. Photo Courtesy CGAC.

François Lyotard replies to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's "Anti-Oedipus," starting his text by making reference to an anecdote about Hans Bellmer, in which Bellmer places a mirror perpendicularly over a female nude. When he moves it, he notices that flowers of unrecognizable flesh spring from the abstract crack where the mirror meets the body, and that they are

reabsorbed when the mirror is moved the opposite way. Lyotard wonders if this signifies the end of representation, or if what happens is a simulacrum of representation in the modern sense, where the interest no longer lies in the accusation of its "bad beautiful harmony," its "false beautiful-totality," but rather in the body which can no longer be conceived as an organism, being made up of reassembled fragments. We should remember Hans Bellmer's bodies tied with rope, as if they were dead animals or simply pieces of meat tied for stewing, as in the "Única" series (1958-1983) or "Die Puppe" (1932-1945). With regard to this, and other works which may imply a possible break-up of modernity, Lyotard concludes that representation has come to an end, if we understand 'representation,' as the presentation in absentia of something which "although still representation, if representation is presentation at least, presenting the unrepresentable, represents in the sense of making 'representations' of someone, reminders, showing something again. Well, what is shown again is the disorder." Desire is no longer conceivable in terms of the subject. Deleuze and Guattari substitute it for an organless body, made up of desirous machines, identifiable with things in nature that correspond to each other simply because they are part of it. With reference to Bellmer (following an exhibition at Ubu Gallery in New York), Kristin Jones evokes the fragments of

dolls' bodies thrown on the floor with the ugly remains of a terrible crime (Artforum, February 1996). Ana Mendieta re-appropriates the body, a voiceless, anonymous mass, for the majority. From all that is unique in her work, she invents a pantheism equal to all nature's creations, something which is not only our biological heritage, but also our place of origin. And she invites us to go back there, by implying an awareness of our common sense of belonging, and a return in the sense of integrating the body once more into the natural world. "My art," she said in 1983, "is based on belief and a universal energy which runs through all things: from insects to man, from man to the spectrum, from the spectrum to plants, from plants to the galaxy."

In her inventory of personal notes, this intention is clear, for example in statements like: "obtaining the form of a body from a tree trunk" or "cut the flowers which grow wild in the countryside (or near a road) into the form of a silhouette / cut the perimeter of the form." The same thing can be seen in the listing of "Ideas for Silhouettes," those rituals of liberation from the demon which she thought possessed her, where she notes several significant thoughts about what were to be her most important works. Silhouettes made with nails, or with pieces of glass and broken mirrors, in the shape of a wine bottle. Hollow silhouettes with candles around them, or a silhouette with a skeleton inside it,

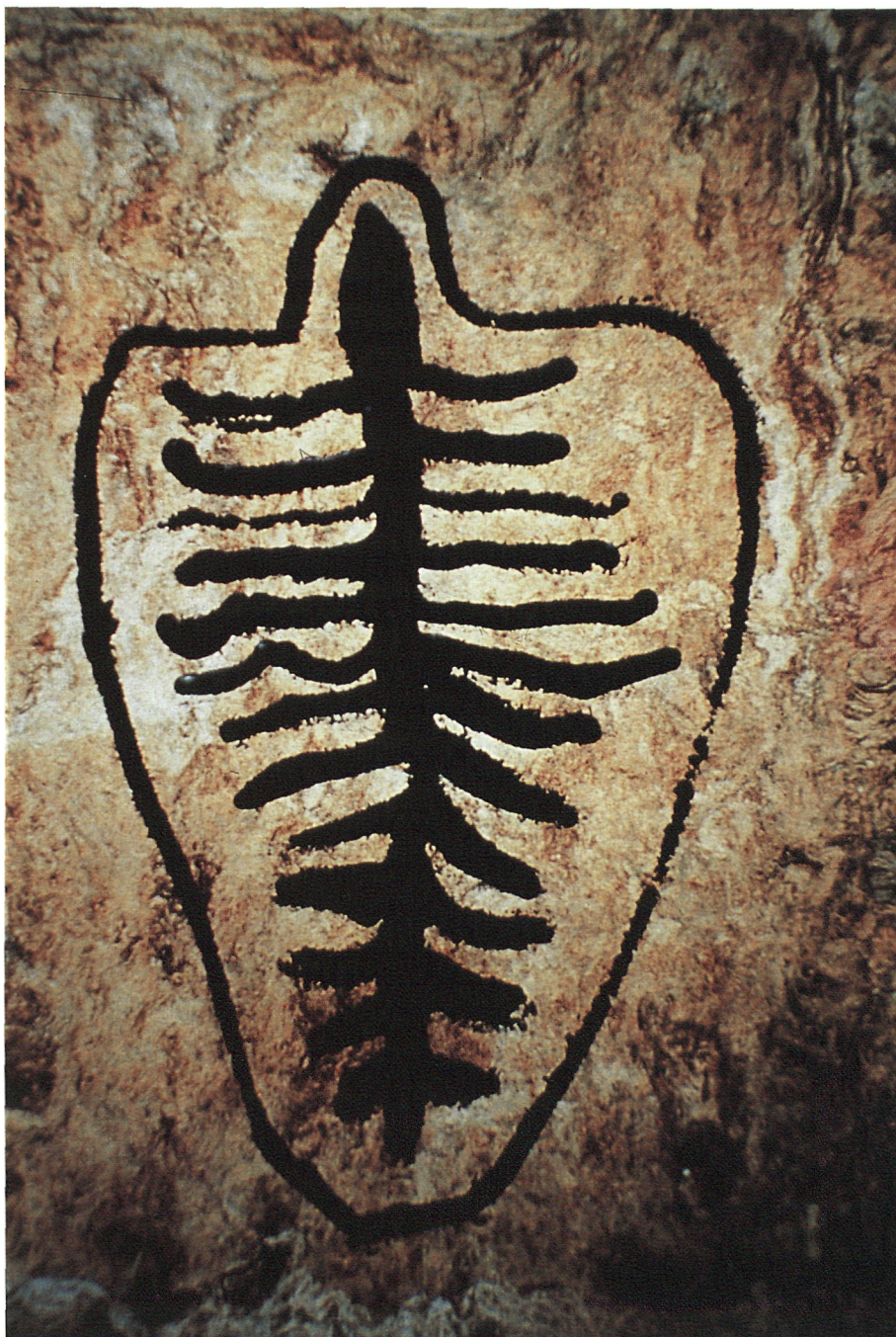
replaced with flowers, or "flowers growing in the form of the silhouette." By referring to what Mendieta wrote about her projects, the photographs she took and the films she made, it is possible to reconstruct what she described in note-form almost perfectly, as can be seen in the following examples: "In the sea. Make the silhouette on the beach – Let it fill with water (and empty again) and fill it with blood (or red paint that spreads into the sea) – document the eruption of the figure for a long time." Or: "Idea: between 2 trees with grass, plants, roots. Make a structure;" "Straw, hair, roots coming out of the ground;" "Make hollow silhouette in the ground, close with wax or clay, fill with oil and lanterns, light it like a candle;" "Seaweed hanging from dead trees;" "Rocks in the shape of figures, covered in mud." Or what she underlines as "important ideas:" "Burn hands in the grass to form a figure;" "Fill the fallen tree trunk with earth and seeds in form of figure."

Her ideas are countless, but their conceptualization seems to stem from a single discourse, whereby the return to nature holds not so much an aesthetic as a political meaning, in which her individual orphanhood is a collective orphanhood, where the void stands out inside the profile of her silhouettes drawn in the earth. A void which is filled with red flowers, bloodstains, fired clay, or which takes on the shape of a leaf, inside which the outside world is

drawn. The leaf-woman, tree-woman, root-woman, earth-woman, fire-woman, stone-woman, glass-woman, the woman of broken mirrors, all imitate the feminine forms of nature and aim to be its most sensitive manifestation. The universal female being. The constant undercurrent of her work is Nature, in nature, like nature, where she said she had spent many years exploring the relationship between her configuration and that of the earth. This is how she explains her results: "I have immersed myself in the very elements which made me. It is through my sculptures that I affirm my emotional links with the earth and I conceptualize culture." This process received the name of de-culturization. Art and Nature are inseparable in her work, because art imitates nature in all of it, corresponding to the old rivalry between the two, and the concept of mimicry as it is understood in some ancient cultures. Mendieta ascribed her fascination for primitive art and culture to her childhood in Cuba, and emphasized the inherent magical qualities of such forms, just as she seems to transfer a sense of magic to the drawings of female bodies in fallen leaves. Organic shapes answer only one need: the need for life. The paradigm of her re-union with nature can also be found in the island body, cut off by earth on all sides, in the imprint body eroded by wind and water, and in the body sitting on a tree trunk, joined to it with clay. Or "myself covered in earth and moss in the forest of Julius /

figure of dry ice beside the river / hair and roots entwined / bonfire – silhouette hands around it / smoke rising from the abyss / dead trunks cut in the form of silhouettes.”

In his essay “De la inscripción a la disolución: un ensayo sobre el consumo en la obra de Ana Mendieta,” Charles Merewether questions whether the artist’s life and work can be separated. Her work consists of a considerable number of performances, actions and “site-specific” installations, drawings, prints, objects, sculptures, videos and films, all created in a period of about 13 years, between 1972 and 1985, during which she moved from Iowa to New York and made several journeys to Europe, including a stay of nearly two years in Rome. Merewether concentrates on an analysis of the period between 1972 and 1975, and claims that Mendieta began to study certain taboos and transgressions right from the beginning, which led her to take on the theme of sacrifice as it is understood in certain primitive rituals. As an example of this, he mentions an untitled performance of November 1982, filmed in super-8, in which Mendieta used blood for the first time. Holding a headless chicken by the neck, she allowed its blood to splash over her pubis. Mendieta had explained this action by saying that, for her, blood had a magical power and she thus never considered it negative. Merewether quotes her as saying: “I wanted my images to have strength, to be magical.”



Ana Mendieta, *Itiba Cahubaba*, 1981. Acrylic on amate paper. 40.64 x 29.21 cm.
Col. Raquelin Mendieta. Photo Courtesy CGAC.

In 1973, Mendieta carried out the first of three actions which would tackle the theme of rape. This action was based on a real event which had taken place on campus at the University of Iowa. She constructed a set in which to simulate the state of a woman who had been

raped – defenseless against her aggressor who had undressed her below the waist, positioned her face-down and tied her to a table. The spectator entered the studio, whose door was ajar, finding it converted into the scene of the crime, with blood-stains on the body and the

floor, and the body lying in a mortified posture. Blood is the accusing element, and here it loses the positive connotation she had tried to give it as bearer of life and energy. Here blood equals injury, pain, death.

Behind this action, there lies a strong political commitment to a collective whose rights have still not been recognized, to the outcast and oppressed in general, fighting against civilized savagery, against power in all its forms. Ana Mendieta asserts her beliefs, individually and socially, and chooses herself as the subject for representations of sacrifice and liberation. Throughout her re-appropriations of the body, she stands firm with religious spirituality, an aspect of her work which is usually attributed to her admiration for santería and, according to Donald Kuspit, to her idea of the body as a sacred space. Her series of silhouettes is the preparation for a ritual which was only to be completed with the passing of time. Kuspit refers to the first of the silhouettes – made in 1973 – and describes how Mendieta covers her motionless body with a bunch of white flower buds. He compares the flower motif to the tree of life which “grows from Mendieta’s apparently dead body, feeding off her decomposing flesh; a concept derived from medieval representations of the mystery surrounding Christ’s death and resurrection.” Kuspit goes on to suggest that Mendieta continues this same

death-life theme in the 1976 ‘Silhouette’ in which a crown of red flowers is placed on an ancient Zapotec tomb in Oaxaca. The body of woman, seen in terms of its ability to give life to inanimate things, is easily integrated into nature’s cycle, where life is born from death and death from life. Mendieta establishes herself in nature, our only real attribute, a nature from which we have been expelled, and so “Lying on the ground or buried in the earth, Mendieta always dissolves into it, becomes part of it [...], she identifies herself completely with the earth[...]. Over and over, we see how she inscribes her body in the earth, establishing a magical, peculiarly innocent relationship with it. She is absorbed into it, and she absorbs it, presumably with emotional benefits for both.” It is practically impossible to disagree with Donald Kuspit’s explanation of Mendieta’s relationship with the earth, which is given absolute priority over the other elements of organic existence. But perhaps we can add, that the artist’s identification with the earth becomes a kind of devolution ritual, a secret dialogue with her earth-self, in which she tattoos her body onto the ground with stones, or burns its outline (such as in “Anima,” Oaxaca, 1976), feeding the earth with her ashes. The earth is not private property, but a public space, and yet she draws herself into it regardless, buries herself in it, hollows it out, leaves her mark like a hunted animal, finds empty

spaces and assigns them an identity with a name and a language.

Nature is Mendieta’s only stage, and all her materials are natural, hence their fragile appearance. Her object of desire is this earth, which she embraces in blood circles which outline her body, this earth which she covers with red flowers or sets alight. Mendieta writes herself onto the earth in primitive calligraphy, and uses ancestral signs. She draws the body of a fertile woman, with the earth, for the earth and like the earth, affirming her sense of being. Her temptation to reproduce makes her appear on countless different stages, using only what nature offers her: the earth is enough, or a tree which she embraces, a fallen leaf into which she draws herself, covering the kilometers of her body. A hollowed body filled with earth, to which she is joined in life and death. She inhabits every silhouette; every leaf into which she draws herself shows us her presence. In fact, Mendieta said that in this way, she thought she could re-establish her links with the universe: “I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body.” This was what she called her “thirst for being,” a huge unrestrainable desire, impossible to ignore, except in the unfamiliar immensity of nothingness, which she innocently kisses in “On Giving Life” (1975). Nothingness takes the form of a skeleton on green grass, like a premonition of that “golden creature” that the world was “to kill and devour.”